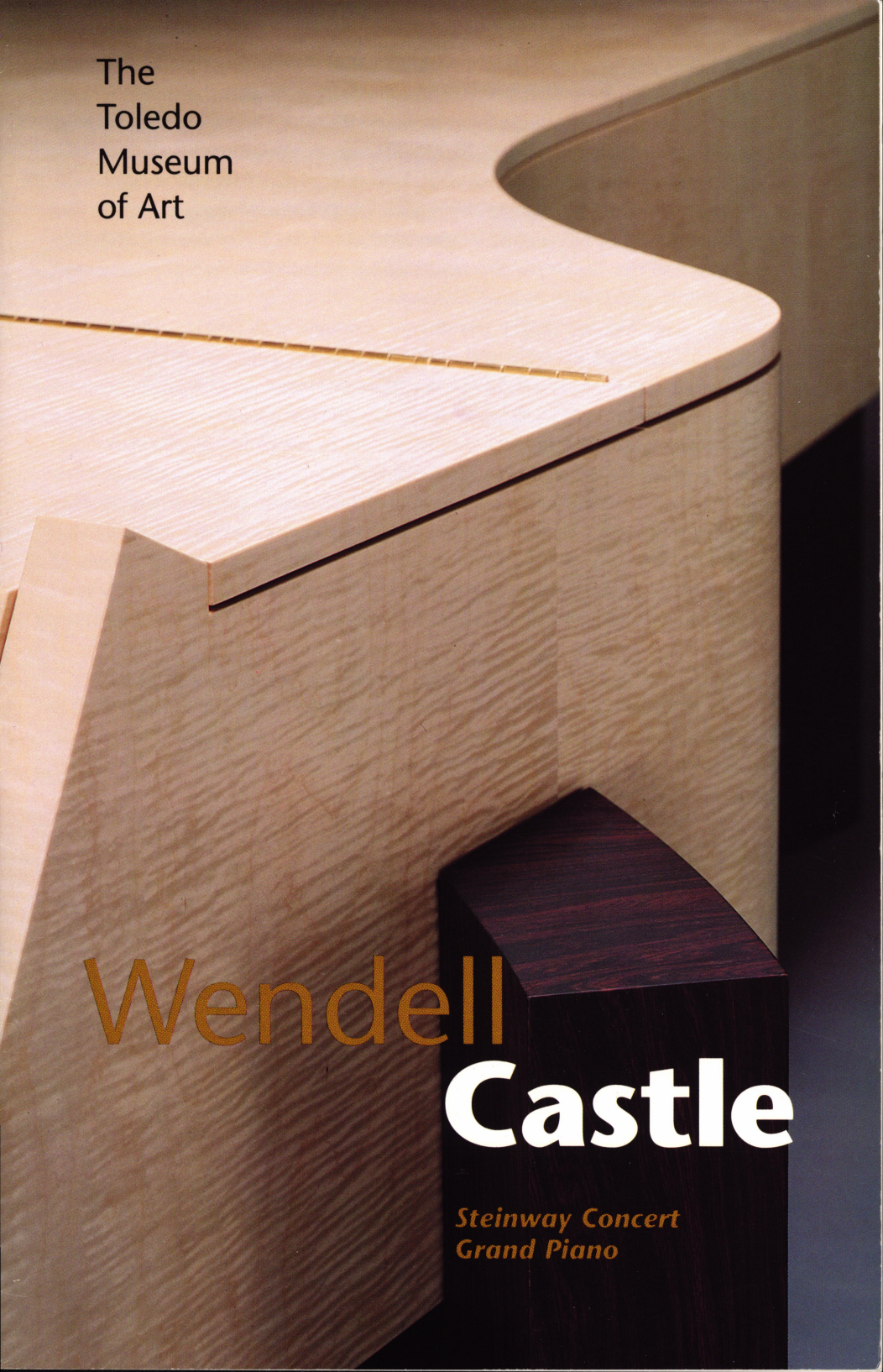
The
Toledo
Museum
of Art



# Wendell Castle

*Steinway Concert Grand Piano*

**The piano that artist Wendell Castle has created for The Toledo Museum of Art challenges in every respect except quality the notions of piano design. The two-part composition consists of a very light-colored, curly maple-veneered case perched atop a base covered with dark-brown, fifty-year-old cocobolo veneer. The traditional three piano legs have been replaced by two semicircular laminated supports that echo the classicizing architecture of the Peristyle, the Museum's 1,710-seat proscenium theater, where the piano will be housed.**

The innovative design is consistent with Castle's approach to furniture in general. For over thirty-five years, the artist, who lives and works in Scottsville, New York, has continually questioned traditional concepts of furniture design, function, and construction, using wood to create highly sculptural forms that frequently are fanciful statements or metaphors for larger artistic issues. A leading figure in the contemporary crafts movement, Castle has been one of the primary catalysts in the development of hand-crafted furniture as a major art form. His chief contribution has been the creation of furniture that is constructed using stack lamination. By gluing together boards to form a mass that can then be carved into volumetric shapes, Castle rendered obsolete the need for conventional furniture joinery.

***Steinway Concert Grand Piano and Bench***, 1994
Piano: maple, mahogany; cocobolo veneer, curly maple veneer; brass
40 5/8 x 75 1/4 x 111 1/4 in. (closed)
Bench: maple; cocobolo veneer; leather
18 1/2 x 33 1/2 x 17 in.

Purchased with funds from the Florence Scott Libbey Bequest in Memory of her Father, Maurice A. Scott, 1994
Photo: David Mohney

**Inspired by a 1987 commission to create the Commemorative 500,000th Steinway Piano, Castle has become one of the few artists actively involved in piano design. He is the only leading American artist making furniture who has a studio equipped to veneer the huge piano lids. In addition to the commemorative nine-foot concert grand, he has completed two baby grand pianos and one upright. All the designs house mechanisms by the noted New York-based piano manufacturer Steinway & Sons.**

Toledo's piano is the fifth one that Castle has executed. The commission grew out of a need to replace one of the Museum's two concert grand pianos. The selection of a grand piano for a concert hall is always a critical process, since the instrument will be used for decades by many musicians. It must be versatile enough to perform a variety of musical styles in performances ranging from solo recitals to concertos. While clear, bright, clean sound was the key factor in the selection of the mechanism for Toledo's piano, pitch, duration, dynamics, and timbre were also evaluated. The choice of the instrument was confirmed by pianist Vladimir Feltsman, who will perform at the inaugural concert.

**Castle prepared six initial proposals for consideration. The accepted design was then realized as a maquette, one-twelfth the size of the actual piano. The artist first suggested a madrone burl-veneered case on a macassar ebony base. The final color scheme of curly maple and cocobolo was substituted to better harmonize with the faux marble walls of the acoustic shell on the Peristyle stage.**

In order to preserve the tonal quality, design changes were limited. Castle was able, however, to achieve his primary goal: to negate the massiveness customarily associated with grand piano design. By placing the semicircular, laminated legs at each end of the piano to support the width of the case, he minimized the bulk of the top half of the instrument. The color scheme and the manner in which each leg seems to pierce the case further reinforce this concept. In fact, the sharp contrast between the colored woods, characteristic of Castle's recent explorations into color, causes the case to "float," seemingly free from the influence of gravity.

**The artist acknowledges the controversial nature of the design. Castle whimsically compares responses to this two-tone piano with the introduction years ago of the sport coat, noting that people initially must have been horrified by the jacket's failure to match the pants. Since Castle is making a critical statement about a form that until now has remained relatively unchallenged, he welcomes such a reaction. Toledo's striking new grand piano clearly brings an added dimension to the Peristyle stage: a bold and innovative visual accompaniment to future performances.**

©1994 The Toledo Museum of Art,
Toledo, Ohio

Text by Joyce E. Smar and Davira S. Taragin.
Edited by T.A. Neff Associates, Chicago
Designed by Donald Bergh, Chicago

This brochure is supported in part by the
Peter Joseph Gallery, New York.

Wendell Castle, 1991 Photo: Michael Galatis